

"FAINTING FRANCIS OR WEeping WILLIE"



Under the Media's Eye. Chloe Marcheli.

“FAINTING FRANCIS OR WEEPING WILLIE”:

THE CONSTRUCTION OF AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS OF MOHAMMED MOSSADEGH



The April 1951 election of Mohammed Mossadegh as Prime Minister of Iran and the subsequent nationalization of oil sparked a prolonged crisis that involved both the British and U.S. governments. No agreement could be reached between the British and Iranians. The crisis culminated in the joint U.S. and British effort, called Operation AJAX, which overthrew Mossadegh in August 1953. The seeds of this coup were sewn before the summer of 1953, however, and this article documents American perceptions of Mossadegh and the situation in Iran during the crisis. It contends that American ideas concerning gender, communism, and peoples of the Middle East, formed an ideology which heightened the Soviet threat, justified Anglo-American intervention, and ultimately resulted in the Eisenhower administration’s greenlighting of Operation AJAX. The changes and continuities of this American mindset are reflected in magazines, newspapers, memoirs, and government documents that span from WWII to the overthrow of Mossadegh. These reflections reveal how cultural attitudes informed perceptions of Iran and its people, which in turn shaped American attitudes and policy towards Iran.

Allen Sellers

Written for America in the Middle East

(HIST 436)

Dr. Nathan Citino

The former CIA operative Kermit Roosevelt’s memoir, *Countercoup*, begins by recounting a June 1953 meeting of high-ranking policymakers on a rainy day in Washington, DC. The men gathered included Secretary of State John Dulles, his brother CIA Director Allen Dulles, Ambassador to Iran Loy Henderson, and Under Secretary of State Walter Bedell Smith, among others. Roosevelt’s objective was to have these men sign off on what he labeled a

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“joint” operation with British and Iranian partners to depose Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. Kermit’s logic was simple: he framed Mossadegh as an “unwitting ally” to Soviet ambitions in the region, as his attempts to supplant the Shah had increased communist power in Iran. He had to be removed lest Iran fall to the communists. Roosevelt claimed that a majority of Iranians would follow the Shah’s lead and that the blowback would be no worse than doing nothing and letting Iran, along with the rest of the Middle East, fall to Soviet communism. The gathered men contemplatively listened to Kermit’s proposal, with the Dulles brothers interjecting pointed questions about the operation to overthrow a so-called “madman.” In the end, they all agreed to Operation AJAX. Most succinctly accepted the operation’s necessity, except for Loy Henderson, who gravely looked upwards “soliciting the Deity’s assistance,” declaring that he “did not like this business” but that they had “no choice but to proceed.”¹

Kermit Roosevelt’s account is as revealing as it is misleading. His narrative is hardly trustworthy. For example, he is hardly being objective in describing the coup as a “joint effort”; in reality, the U.S. government twisted the Shah’s arm until he acquiesced to their plan.² Additionally, in meetings and communiqué between departments, the seeds of Operation AJAX had been planted long before the described 1953 meeting. Even so, Roosevelt’s characterization of the stage and the actors involved in the Iranian Crisis reveals the logic that went into the decision to overthrow Mossadegh. The perceptions that Mossadegh’s actions were driven by “madness,” that the Soviets were all too willing to exploit the weakness of a third world leader, and that the U.S. government was obligated to dirty its hands to prevent subversion followed a logic imbued with 1950s American ideology. Roosevelt’s assessment that Mossadegh was an “unwitting ally” and that the Russians were bent on achieving ancient designs for a warm water port exemplifies that type of analysis that thrived in early Cold War America.³ This rationale was weaponized against perceived enemies, both foreign and domestic, in diplomatic communiqués as well as in the press, magazines, and TV. Roosevelt’s proposal achieved unanimous support from his peers in Washington because his paranoia-laden language resonated with the world in which 1950s Americans lived.

1. Kermit Roosevelt, *Countercoup, the Struggle for the Control of Iran* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 1-19.

2. Shiva Balaghi, “Silenced Histories and Sanitized Autobiographies: The 1953 CIA Coup in Iran,” *Biography* 36, no. 1 (2013): pp. 71-96, <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2013.0009>.

3. Roosevelt, *Countercoup*, 1-19.

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The covert intervention under the Eisenhower administration had its roots in the Truman administration. The April 1951 election of Mohammed Mossadegh as Prime Minister of Iran and the subsequent nationalization of oil sparked a prolonged crisis that involved both the British and U.S. governments. No agreement could be reached between the British and Iranian governments, despite the Truman administration's efforts to mediate terms of nationalization. The British refused to cede control over the refining and transport of oil while Mossadegh, trying to maintain a tenuous unity within the National Front party, could not compromise on Iranian control of its oil. The British refused to transport the oil and Iranian politics became increasingly unstable as government revenue dried up without profits from oil sales. Amid this crisis, U.S. press and intelligence were hyperaware of the Tudeh Party, an Iranian communist organization whose membership numbered in the tens of thousands,⁴ which was considered a serious threat backed by the Soviets. Even so, the Truman administration had largely avoided the use of direct action, but with the ascension of Eisenhower and his CIA director Allen Dulles, who were more willing to resort to covert action, the U.S. government committed itself to Operation AJAX. In concert with British intelligence, CIA operatives such as Kermit Roosevelt directed false flag bombings, political bribes, and propaganda efforts to round up support for the overthrow of Mossadegh. These efforts eventually culminated in the deposition of Mossadegh and the retrenchment of the Shah in August of 1953.

The seeds of this coup, however, were sown before the summer of 1953; perceptions of Mossadegh and the situation in Iran during the crisis, formed prior to the Eisenhower administration, buttressed the logic behind intervention. American ideas concerning gender, communism, and peoples of the Middle East formed an ideology which heightened the Soviet threat, justified Anglo-American intervention, and ultimately resulted in the Eisenhower administration's greenlighting of Operation AJAX. The changes and continuities of this American mindset are reflected in magazines, newspapers, memoirs, and government documents that spanned from WWII to the overthrow of Mossadegh. These reflections reveal how cultural attitudes informed perceptions of Iran and its people, which in turn shaped American attitudes and policy towards Iran.

Among scholars of the 1953 coup, disagreements abound regarding the details of American, British, and Iranian motivations. Ervand Abrahamian argues that too much focus has been placed on Cold War politics and rhetoric.

4. Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 320.

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He claims that although officials justified the coup in Cold War terms, the real motivation for the U.S. to participate in the coup did not come from fear of communism, but from fear of oil nationalization in developing countries.⁵ This argument contradicts Mark Gasiorowski, who recently argued that other scholars have not focused enough on American perception of the communist threat. He concludes that American policymakers acted to remove the communist threat without strong evidence that such a threat was real; he does not, however, delve into why Americans policymakers decided on supporting a coup.⁶ Examination of the cultural context surrounding the decisions made by US policymakers will give an explanation for why policymakers took the communist threat so seriously, despite a lack of strong evidence that Iranian communists were capable of successful revolution.

Previous historians that have studied the preparation and execution of Operation AJAX have either sidelined culture as an analytic or limited themselves to one lens of cultural evaluation. For example, Mary Ann Heiss singled out gender while Gasiorowski focused on anti-communism in their analyses of American perception. Both of their contributions are vital in understanding the decision to overthrow Mossadegh, but they fail to capture the multi-faceted way cultural values affect how people view the world around them. The key is to understand how these different lenses built upon one another. The first section of this essay examines how the interplay among American ideas on gender, communism, and race formed an ideological filter through which information was processed and acted upon. Combining these attitudes into an overarching ideology, rather than singling out one concept alone, gives a more holistic sense of the American mindset in the era than previous scholars have attempted. Subsequent sections expand upon how this ideology is reflected in depictions of Iran and Mossadegh both in the general public, through magazines and newspapers, and in government documents. As a whole, this analysis will attempt to reveal how the ideologies of gender, communism, and race influenced perception of Mossadegh and the Iranian crisis among the American public and government, which in turn led to the decision to overthrow Mohammed Mossadegh.

5. Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (New York: New Press, 2013), 1-8.

6. Mark J. Gasiorowski, "U.S. Perceptions of the Communist Threat in Iran during the Mossadegh Era," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 21, no. 3 (2019): pp. 185-221, https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_a_00898.

Communism, Gender, and Orientalism: Conceptualizing an Ideological Filter

The entirety of Mossadegh's rise and fall occurred within the era of McCarthyism, when Soviet and communist suspicion was at its highest. This paranoia was not limited to high-profile show trials in Washington, but also existed in the everyday lives of Americans. The domestic manifestation of McCarthyite rhetoric and fears translated into how Americans perceived events around the world. McCarthyism touched all segments of 1950s society; condensing exactly what Americans felt about communism in this era might be a chimera. Even so, exploring the depictions and perceptions of communists that abounded in the era is helpful because McCarthy-style descriptions often appeared in newspapers, magazine articles, and diplomatic documents.

One important aspect of McCarthyism was the tendency to view communists as monolithic puppets of a wider Soviet strategy. Politicians and news writers alike labeled communists as being under the influence of the Kremlin. Their evidence for such a grand conspiracy was limited, forcing them to rely on two pieces of "proof." First, they pointed to the "Duclos letter." The document, written by a French communist and circulated in America in 1945, criticized the leader of the Communist Party U.S.A (C.P.U.S.A.), Earl Browder, for eschewing revolution in favor of working within the existing American political system. The fact that Earl Browder was removed from his position after circulation of the document was proof in McCarthyite trials and hearings that the C.P.U.S.A. was under foreign influence.⁷ Second, politicians and columnists often referenced a 1930s communist manual that contained an oath pledging undying loyalty to the party. Ex-communists also helped to support the construction of a grand conspiracy, attesting that violence was "central to the curriculum" and no act was too heinous as long as Moscow demanded it. These arguments were easy to advance in this time, as Americans were hyperaware of the deadly political intrigue and human rights abuses that typified the Stalinist era. In short, American communists were seen as a committed part of a worldwide conspiracy directed from Moscow: puppets in Stalin's game.⁸ This stereotyping of American communists as cogs in a violent conspiracy was translated and built upon in American perception of the communist Tudeh Party in Iran. In the

7. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Investigation of Communist Activities in the State of Michigan*, 83rd Congress, 2nd session, 1954, 5647-5649.

8. Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 131-139.

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world of McCarthy, there was no room to be on the political left without getting lumped in with the larger geopolitical goals of the Soviet Union.

During the crisis over oil nationalization in Iran, American policymakers' views on the Cold War in the third world were shifting. In the years following World War II, Washington usually refused to support European allies when their colonies rebelled against them. National Security Council Report 51, which examined American relations with Southeast Asia and set recommendations for how to approach revolutionary conflict in Indonesia and Indochina, is a prime example of post-war American attitudes towards the Third World. The document argues that inducing “the Dutch and the French to adapt their policies” towards their subjects was of utmost urgency and that support for

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Dutch or French imperialism was out of the question.⁹ With the beginning of the 1950s, however, Americans increasingly came to view geopolitics as a crusade against communism. The Korean War, the loss of China, and the rise of McCarthyism hardened U.S. feelings towards third world revolutionaries. Anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist movements were gradually seen as a risk for communist subversion; Joseph McCarthy himself warned against coziness with third world nationalists.¹⁰ Mossadegh's premiership began during this shift in America's relationship towards third world revolutionaries and communists. The logic for Mossadegh's coup d'état required this shift for its justification.

As the Cold War intensified into a crusade, Americans progressively began to perceive events relating to communism, both domestic and abroad, in gendered terms. One of the most emblematic and influential examples of gendering of the Cold War conflict was the Long Telegram, an analysis of Soviet government,

9. U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, The Far East and Australasia, Volume VII, Part 2* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1976), Document 317.

10. Patrick Glenn and Bryan Gibson, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions And The Making Of Our Times* (Macat Library, 2017), 110-124.

motives, and methods drafted by the Deputy Chief of Mission to Moscow George Kennan in 1947, sent to the State Department, and later published in *Foreign Affairs*. In his examination of the document, historian Frank Costigliola argues that Kennan painted an emotionally laden picture of the Cold War by utilizing language which cast the Soviets as hypermasculine predators of weak and unwitting peoples. This rhetoric simplified the debates about the Soviets in Washington and helped crystallize the strategy of containment.¹¹ The telegram featured McCarthy-esque paranoia about the Soviets' intention to "stimulate all forms of disunity" around the world and the gendering of Cold War geopolitics in the larger American crusade against communist subversion. The fact that the analysis was not just circulated within foreign policy circles of the government, but also in *Foreign Affairs* shows that this type of ideological framing was not limited to the government. The Long Telegram, with its gendered language and dire tone, served as part of the foundation of American ideology that would later amplify concern over Soviet penetration in Iran.

The Soviet Union was not the only country or people that were described in gendered terms. Americans were accustomed to simplifying the complexities of international relations and foreign societies into the reductive rhetoric of gender. For example, columnists and officials alike criticized India's Cold War neutrality in gendered terms. Because the Indian government did not tow the American line by urging mediation in the crises caused by the split of Korea, Indians were regarded as fickle and effeminate.¹² In essence, they lacked the masculine "firmness" and "vigor" that the Long Telegram argued was necessary to combat communism. Furthermore, Indians were supposedly "beguiled by the spiritual" as opposed to the firm and rationalized American approach. At the same time, Americans viewed India's neighbor, Pakistan, in a much more favorable, masculinized manner. The Pakistani leaders were described as virile in their commitment to anti-communism.¹³ In short, Americans were well-versed in translating the international relations into gendered terms in order to make sense of foreign governments. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the American perception of Mossadegh was also colored by this ideological filter

11. Frank Costigliola, "'Unceasing Pressure for Penetration': Gender, Pathology, and Emotion in George Kennan's Formation of the Cold War," *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 4 (1997): p. 1309, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2952904>.

12. Andrew Jon Rotter, *Comrades at Odds: the United States and India, 1947-1964* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), 211-219.

13. Rotter, *Comrades at Odds*, 212-213.

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and produced a highly gendered interpretation of his personality and actions.

Domestic culture primed the general public to presume that effeminate men were the most susceptible to communist subversion. In the early 1950s, idyllic home life was considered under siege by communists from within. Any man exhibiting non-conforming traits, such as promiscuity, homosexuality, or femininity, was a possible target for communists to prey upon. Academics helped to craft a symbol of the virile and tough “family man” and his nuclear family in resistance to communism and effeminate weakness.¹⁴ Anyone or anything outside of this paradigm was suspect.

Orientalist stereotypes and images regularly made appearances in analyses of Middle Eastern geopolitics, both in the government and in the public sphere. The Truman and Eisenhower administrations both exhibited Orientalist and paternalistic attitudes towards the peoples of the Middle East. Arabs were seen as having an inferiority complex that contributed to their irrationality. This characterization extended to Iranians as well because of their shared Islamic faith. Despite the fact that Egyptian leader Gamel Abdel Nasser was Arab and Mossadegh was Iranian, the two were often painted with the same brush as fanatical nationalists that were irrationally overcompensating for colonial humiliation.¹⁵ This racial examination that portrayed Middle Eastern nationalism as an unsound overreaction was a shift from the immediate post-World War II attitudes towards Arab nationalism, which characterized Arab nationalism as a potentially positive force. Historian George Antonius’s 1938 book *The Arab Awakening* became a foundational textbook for scholars and foreign policy officials and painted a more positive, albeit paternalistic, picture of Middle Eastern nationalism. Antonius argued that Arab nationalism owed its origins to American missionaries and suggested that the upper-class and educated leaders of such movements could be supported by the U.S. government. The rise of men like Nasser and Mossadegh presented a challenge to the ambivalent paternalism of the post-war era and caused policymakers to revert to more dichotomous and less charitable interpretations. Leaders like Mossadegh were seen as ignorant and neurotic while their supporters were seen as fanatics.¹⁶

14. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 97-101.

15. Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945* (United States: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

16. Matthew F. Jacobs, *Imagining the Middle East: the Building of an American Foreign Policy, 1918-1967* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 106-117.

These interpretations carried with them a long history of racial construction of peoples of the “orient” as ignorant, fanatical, overly emotional, and infantile.

The threads between American anti-communist, orientalist, and gendered attitudes weaved a mesh through which information passed and was understood by the public and policymakers alike. These ideas were often so tightly bound together they were impossible to parse from one another. A single line from a single source might contain elements of all three. Thus, images and descriptions of a weak Mossadegh contained gendered and Orientalist elements which further fed into fears of communist forces. Armed with a conception of American ideology, it is possible to make sense of the wide variety of sources and grasp the underlying ideology which connects them. In doing so, the U.S. government’s decision to commit to Operation AJAX can be further comprehended.

“Fainting Francis or Weeping Willie”: The Popular Conceptualization of Mossadegh

Mossadegh as feeble, emotional, and irrational was the most potent image because his tendency to faint, weep, and utilize emotionally charged rhetoric flew in the face of what Americans thought of as characteristics of a competent leader. They viewed these peculiarities as a danger, especially when considering the threat of the Tudeh Party. These uncharitable and inaccurate interpretations of Mossadegh’s actions were not limited to his moments of supposed weakness; even when noting his craftiness, political maneuverability, and persuasiveness, analysts and writers often portrayed him in unflattering terms. These representations produced a distorted picture of Mossadegh that would be used to justify his overthrow.

From the onset of Mossadegh’s premiership to his eventual removal, the press painted a picture of him that emphasized weakness and neuroticism, traits which contemporaries conflated with femininity. Many reports used neutral language to describe Mossadegh and instead placed their focus on the rise of nationalism in Iran, but accounts still abounded which painted him in questionable terms. One writer reporting on the first weeks of the nationalization crisis noted Mossadegh’s “emotional belief in neutrality” that the author argued would “benefit only the communists and the Tudeh Party.”¹⁷ Early descriptors

17. “Iran Shah Gives In, OKs Oil Grab Bloc Leader as Premier,” *Houston Post* (Houston, TX), April 30, 1951.

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of Mossadegh included words like “wispy”¹⁸ and accused him of locking himself in his chambers in fear of leftist mobs.¹⁹ Readers of these newspapers would have had an easy time drawing connections between his purported weakness, cowardice, and emotionality with reported government warnings about the communist threat of the Tudeh Party.

Some journalists reported on Mossadegh’s efforts to appeal to American sensibilities. In the fall of 1951 Mossadegh visited the United States to speak at the UN, to negotiate with the U.S. government as a broker, and to entreat American sympathy. Journalists acknowledged his petition that Americans remember their past struggle to “release their homeland from the fetters of economic and political imperialism” and find common ground with Iran.²⁰ In essence, Mossadegh hoped to conjure the image of an independent-minded American revolutionary in the American mind.

Mossadegh’s attempts to ingratiate himself with Americans fell flat because in the months following the 1951 tour his propensity for weeping and fainting – a deliberate tactic Mossadegh employed to demonstrate his passion and devotion for the cause of Iranian independence that Americans failed to understand²¹ – became a focal point for ridicule. One columnist joined in this mockery in a short article imploring readers to express gratitude during Thanksgiving for a variety of things, such as living outside communist China, Bulgaria, or Yugoslavia. He also stated that everyone should be happy not to be “governed by a Fainting Francis or a Weeping Willie like Dr. Mossadegh” or have to govern Iranians who would “assassinate you at the drop of a turban.”²² Although set in a sarcastic tone, the underlying message was clear: the world was full of communistic upheaval and Mossadegh represented a weak leader beset by communists and faceless Iranians whose murderous frenzy meant chaos.

This idea was seen not just in text, but also in comics accompanying articles following the 1951 visit. One article in *The New York Times* was critical, albeit respectful, of Mossadegh. The article notes his ability to rally the various classes of Iranian society to the cause of securing independence and argues

18. “Oil Company Makes Conciliatory Move,” *Houston Post*, May 28, 1951.

19. “Iran Mob Threatens Holy War,” *Houston Post*, May 22, 1951.

20. “Mossadegh, Here, Appeals to Americans to Back Iran,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 1951.

21. Mary Ann Heiss, *Empire and Nationhood: the United States, Great Britain, and Iranian Oil, 1950-1954* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 230-234.

22. Paul Gallico, “Several Good Reasons for Being Thankful,” *Houston Post*, November 18, 1951.

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that British diplomats failed to see the futility of maintaining control of Iran. However, the accompanying comic, "Oily Baba," features a frail and shaking Mossadegh surrounded by orientalized agents of subversion with labels such as "unemployment" and "chaos."²³ The more balanced examination of the geopolitical situation was undermined by this comic which framed him as a weak coward trying to contain a situation out of his control. This sort of undercutting was common in how Americans were exposed to Mossadegh. For every neutral or nuanced article analyzing the crisis, another negatively charged depiction existed, which played to the cultural perspectives of American readers.

Popular magazines followed a similar trend in their reporting of Mossadegh in the months prior to and following the visit. Reporting on hospital visits while on the tour, a *Time* article acknowledges that "every newspaper reader knows" of his fainting and asks "What Ails Mossadegh?" The answer was not any medical condition, as the article mentions hospital visits did not find any significant problems, but instead laid the blame on his "tantrum-my temperament" and "excitability."²⁴ All of these narratives culminated in *Time*'s Man of the Year "honor" at the end of 1951. In line with other sources, it highlights his "tantrums," calls him "peculiar," and compares him to a "willful little boy."²⁵ The article paints a picture of an infantile, neurotic, and thoroughly foreign leader who has the entire world worriedly watching his shifting and unpredictable will. Man of the Year was no honor for Mossadegh and instead solidified a negative image in the American mind beyond redemption. The writers of newspapers and magazines filtered away any notion of Mossadegh exhausting himself navigating a complex political game against the forces of colonialism. Instead, in the months following the 1951 visit, they promoted a caricature that endangered not only his people, but the world. This type of portrayal dominated until the end of Mossadegh's premiership, with one article branding him the "weeping strong man" while describing the political turmoil caused by the initial failure of Operation AJAX.²⁶ Thus, it was difficult, if not impossible, for Americans to perceive Mossadegh without conjuring images of fragility and femininity.

In his fall 1951 visit, Mossadegh had hoped to be viewed as a revolutionary

23. Michael Clark, "Iran's Crisis Deepens, But Premier Stays On: Oily Baba," *The New York Times*, September 23, 1951.

24. "What Ails Mossadegh?" *Time* 58, (October 29, 1951), 43.

25. "1951 Man of the Year: Mohammed Mossadegh," *Time* 59, (January 7, 1952), 18-21.

26. "Mossadegh in Control of Iran as Shah Ouster Plot Fails," *Houston Post*, August 19, 1953.

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akin to the founding fathers of American past. In fact, Mossadegh’s popularity rose largely because of Iranian will to secure independence from Britain and Russia. In the cultural context of the 1950s, Mossadegh could have been portrayed by journalists, comics, and analysts as a sympathetic fighter against imperialism and communism. The 1951 visit might have been a turning point in creating a positive narrative by which Americans perceived Mossadegh. This idea was *sometimes* reflected in sources more sympathetic to the Iranian plight, but these interpretations were far less potent than those that used anti-communist, gendered, and Orientalist rhetoric to construe Mossadegh as weak-willed, irrational, and foolish. As a result, Mossadegh’s appeals to American revolutionary spirit were largely forgotten in the early half of 1952, leaving largely negative views of Mossadegh until his eventual removal.



The Price of Being ‘Man of the Year.’ Chloe Marcheli.

American perceptions of Mossadegh as effeminate, indecisive, and naïve would have been benign without the additional hyperawareness of so-called anarchy on the streets of Tehran. Iranian politics were certainly characterized by mob violence, riots, and assassinations brought on by political turmoil, unemployment, and occasionally foreign — sometimes U.S. government sponsored — subversion. In the McCarthyite era, American reaction to exposure to images of turmoil was almost anaphylactic in nature. Newspapers and magazines built on this fear and created a feeling that Iran was close to communist takeover. Americans, who were chasing communist ghosts at home,

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believed that Iran, along with much of the world, was in the process of burning. This conviction, in conjunction with the perception of an incapable and fainting Mossadegh, provided the United States with justification for intervention.

Newspapers were more blatant in their depiction of Iranian chaos than they were of Mossadegh's weakness. Just glancing at headlines written by *New York Times* contributor Michael Clark, one got a sense of disorder: "Iran Kept in Turmoil by Oil and Communism,"²⁷ "Terrorism Called Silent Ally in Triumph of Mossadegh,"²⁸ and "Mossadegh, Home Again, Faces Growing Crisis," to name a few.²⁹ A common theme was to conflate nationalism with turmoil. One *New York Times* article contended that, like Arab nationalism, Iranian nationalism was conceptually unlike western nationalism or patriotism. Instead, the author espoused that Iranian nationalism was fanatical, religiously motivated, and prone to violence. Mossadegh, therefore, was painted as stirring forces over which he had no control.³⁰ This article fit within the larger trend of growing American antipathy toward third world nationalism as a dangerous and chaotic force. Mossadegh was typed as unwittingly playing with a dangerous fire which he would not be able to extinguish.

Magazines also contributed to the sense of chaos in Iran. In the wake of Stalin's death on March 5, 1953, *Life* published an article headed by "False God Dies, Crisis is Born." The subsequent pages featured pictures of contenders for Soviet leadership, leftist agitation across the world, and communists executing landlords in China. Iranian political violence was included with photographs labeled with "confusion brings conflict" and "blood to Iran." American fears would have undoubtedly been aroused by the photographs. The subsequent article, "The Anglo-American Job," argues that Washington and London had to work together with "energy and political resourcefulness" to solve worldwide instability and prevent collectivist domination.³¹ To most readers, the situation did not require a nuanced understanding; the world was in danger and action had to be taken. The positioning of the Iranian pictures next to those of communist subversion around the world forced a connection between Tudeh-inspired violence and the monolithic danger of world communism. *Life* magazine's call for

27. "Mossadegh in Control of Iran as Shah Ouster Plot Fails," *Houston Post*, August 19, 1953.

28. Michael Clark, "Iran Kept in Turmoil by Oil and Communism," *The New York Times*, April 29, 1951.

29. Michael Clark, "Terrorism Called Silent Ally in Triumph of Mossadegh," *The New York Times*, November 29, 1951.

30. Michael Clark, "Mossadegh, Home Again, Faces Growing Crisis," *The New York Times*, November 25, 1951.

31. Edward Crankshaw, "False God Dies, Crisis is Born," *Life* 34 (March 16, 1953), 20-33; and Walter Lipman, "The Anglo-American Job," *Life* 34 (March 16, 1953), 20-33.

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cooperation between the two powers, directly following images of Mossadegh and riots in Tehran, was almost prophetic considering the MI6 and the CIA were sowing the seeds of the coup at the time of publishing.

A dominant narrative, holding that Mossadegh was an incompetent leader and Iran was in chaos, established itself in the first year of the crisis. Alternate, less alarming, and more neutral descriptions existed, but they were subsumed in the months following Mossadegh's visit, so that by 1952 Americans thought of him as a threat to security. The most powerful and impactful representation was of the type presented in "Oily Baba" and the Man of the Year article.

"Prisoner of the Streets": Official Perception of Communist Chaos in Iran

The descriptions found in memoirs, magazines, and newspapers would be irrelevant to discussions of Operation AJAX if diplomatic documents did not use the same language and narratives. But there are striking similarities, as U.S. policymakers carried the same ideological-driven assumptions as their domestic counterparts. CIA, State Department, and White House documents all sketched a similar portrait of Mossadegh as unpredictable, naïve, and emotional. The post-facto memoirs of officials involved in the negotiations with and overthrow of Mossadegh, such as George McGhee and Kermit Roosevelt, also exhibited comparable attitudes. Because these mindsets were held by a wide variety of people within the government and domestic society, they could be classified as coming from the same cultural context.

"Mossadegh had all three qualities of being racially inferior, effeminate, and lacking in anti-communist resolve."

Just as with domestic media sources, the American tone when describing Mossadegh in diplomatic contexts varies from neutral to denigrating. In a report sent from the embassy in Iran to the State Department in the first month of his premiership, he was initially cast as a "experienced politician" whose "shrewd" and cautious balancing of support had effectively granted him significant powers. This relatively positive assessment was subsequently undermined when the report cautioned that "the character of the man himself," his "emotions under stress," his fainting at the sight supporters throwing flowers, and lack

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of a “clear perception” jeopardized stability in Iran. Despite the indicated shortcomings of Mossadegh, the report did not call for his downfall. On the contrary, it suggested U.S. support in the hopes that he could be steered in the right direction.³² This document is emblematic of policymakers’ initial feelings towards Mossadegh. Neutral or even positive descriptions existed, but were dispersed among narratives with highly charged rhetoric that called into question Mossadegh’s ability. American paternalism and exceptionalism also made an appearance, as officials hoped to steer him in the right direction and prevent communists from taking advantage of the situation. Documents also demonstrated that Americans were critical of the British and that Americans thought anti-communism was of higher priority than appeasing British interests.

For the most part, officials were resigned to the fact that he was in a strong political position and should not be overthrown.³³ Even so, not all officials saw an opportunity for compromise at this early stage in 1951. In the minutes from a CIA meeting, Allen Dulles stated that the only solution was to have the “Shah throw out Mossadegh” and “temporarily rule by decree”; he also stated that he wanted to discuss this matter with oilman turned diplomat George McGhee. In subsequent meetings, George McGhee, Allen Dulles, and Kermit Roosevelt discussed who would talk to the Shah.³⁴ Within the first months of Mossadegh’s premiership, a divide over support for overthrow appeared within the government. The source of this divide was not in how officials perceived Mossadegh – the assumption that he was weak and ineffectual remained consistent among the groups – instead, this divide existed due to differing opinions on the feasibility of overthrowing Mossadegh.

Just as in the press, Mossadegh’s visit in 1951 proved to be a turning point in solidifying opinion on Mossadegh for U.S. government officials. George McGhee met with Mossadegh during his tour with the goal of facilitating a deal between him and the British. He introduced Mossadegh in his memoir as “the crying premier” in line with popular sources. McGhee called his behavior “erratic,” noticed his “delightfully childlike way of sitting in a chair,” and stated that he had trouble understanding “a few facts of life about the international oil business.”³⁵ McGhee’s words show that he was influenced by the same

32. U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, Iran, 1951-1954*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 2017), 23.

33. U.S. Department of State, *F.R.U.S., Iran 1951-1954*, 30.

34. U.S. Department of State, *F.R.U.S., Iran 1951-1954*, 26.

35. George Crews McGhee, *I Did It This Way: from Texas and Oil to Oxford, Diplomacy, and Corporate*

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sort of ideological filtering that the press was. Although he was critical of British actions, he never described them in such denigrating terms. Ultimately, he was unable to broker a deal due to inflexibility on both sides. From that point on, reports did not critique the British position as much as they criticized Mossadegh for his supposed irrationality, stubbornness, or naivety.

As nationalization negotiations stalled and the state of chaos seemed to continue into 1952, policymakers became increasingly weary of encouraging democracy through Mossadegh. The machinery of U.S. foreign relations churned out further evaluations of alternatives for leadership of Iran. The scrutiny of other potential candidates for leadership of Iran reflected the same ideological approach that was applied to Mossadegh. The Shah, who Dulles had wanted to rule by decree, had a mixed reputation — one embassy dispatch branded him as “indecisive and weak though well-intentioned” and another examined his “passivity” towards necessary political intervention — and therefore necessitated a strong premier to replace Mossadegh in the minds of decision-makers.³⁶ American and British diplomats met in May 1952 to discuss possible candidates for prime minister in the event that the Shah requested Mossadegh’s resignation. Discussion of those who were rejected included similar denigrating language as was used against Mossadegh. Hasan Arfa was called “unstable” and a “wild man.” Matin Daftari was nicknamed “Neutralist Joe” and considered “moderate, although ineffective.” Ali Shayegan called a “narrow and bigoted man” who purportedly shared Mossadegh’s belief in “restricted royal prerogatives.”³⁷ In essence, these men were faulted with being overly emotional, weak-willed, and unreasonable, respectively.

Meanwhile, the men whom the British and Americans described positively displayed authoritarian streaks that officials believed would be useful in combating communism. Ahmad Qavam was seen as susceptible to “nepotism” and “corruption,” but had the important upside of being a “strong man” who could “check the drift toward anarchy.” Fazlollah Zahedi, who rose to power after the 1953 coup, supposedly had “interest in practical problems” and would make a solution to the oil crisis on a “realistic basis.” Ali Soheili was highly regarded as the “most useful and practical” of the choices.³⁸ Approval did not exempt these men from receiving stereotypical accounts; Qavam’s “extremely oriental

Boards (Danbury, CT: Rutledge Books, 2001), 184-197.

36. U.S. Department of State, *F.R.U.S., Iran 1951-1954*, 55; FRU.S., Iran 1951-1954, 75.

37. U.S. Department of State, *F.R.U.S., Iran 1951-1954*, 73.

38. U.S. Department of State, *F.R.U.S., Iran 1951-1954*, 73.

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manner” reportedly made him difficult to understand.³⁹ These descriptions taken together show that American decision-makers wanted a strong man, a stark contrast to previous calls that democratic government ought to be encouraged.

What mattered to Americans then was whether the contenders exhibited traits of irrationality, neutrality, or naivety that were associated with Mossadegh; despots would be tolerated if they had the will to carry out programs which Americans thought of as rational. This rationale had consequences for American action: in July 1952 Mossadegh resigned from his post after a dispute with the Shah. Qavam took his place and Americans immediately sought to arrange for aid to Iran to buy time for a negotiated settlement. Qavam, however, resigned within a matter of days. American enthusiasm for Qavam could only be understood as a consequence of heightened paranoia of 1950s America. Qavam might have been old and un-westernized, but at least he would neutralize the communist threat. It was paternalistically assumed that leaders willing to toe the American line were more virile and could be guided in the right direction, even if they exhibited “Oriental” tendencies. Meanwhile, Mossadegh had all three qualities of being racially inferior, effeminate, and lacking in anti-communist resolve. By this point in 1952, the ideological track which conflated neutrality with effeminacy had been laid, leading straight to the overthrow of Mossadegh in August 1953.

American officials were concerned about the temperament of Mossadegh and his potential replacements because they viewed Iran as embroiled in chaos, similar to how the press portrayal. A litany of documents stressed street fights and expressed concern over how much control Mossadegh had over the conflicts taking place in the country. An October 1951 document, written the same month as the 1951 tour, labeled him as a “prisoner of the ‘streets.’”⁴⁰ Analysis regularly referred to street violence and expressed concern over the level of control the government had. Feelings that Mossadegh was weak in the face of communism combined with fear of the streets put policymakers into a highly paranoid frame of mind.

In a report on Iranian elections in April 1952, Kermit Roosevelt lamented that the government was “blind” to “subversion” and that the Tudeh Party was exploiting nationalistic “anti-American sentiment.” In the same document,

39. U.S. Department of State, *F.R.U.S., Iran 1951-1954*, 68.

40. U.S. Department of State, *F.R.U.S., Iran 1951-1954*, 51.

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Roosevelt called for a prompt policy clarification on how to deal with the threat.⁴¹ Not every forecast was so gloomy. One document pointed out that Mossadegh should not “be accused at the present moment of softness towards alliance with communism.” But Secretary of State Dean Acheson apparently did not trust the evaluation and placed a question mark in the margins of his copy.⁴² Allen Dulles also either ignored or disbelieved that positive news and instead focused on alarmist updates that indicated the “communist threat was considerably enhanced by Mossadegh’s present attitude.”⁴³ These sources together show us that non-alarmist opinions existed within the government – not all diplomats and analysts saw the Tudeh threat as particularly pressing – but these optimistic assessments were filtered away because grim forecasts were far more compelling in light of prevailing McCarthyite anxiety. By 1952, actors like Dulles were set on the path to intervention because their mindsets naturally pointed them in that direction.

It is important to note that even American experts and officials who were not supportive of hardline intervention, such as a coup, still espoused paternalistic beliefs about Iranians and advocated for intervention, albeit in the limited form of assistance to the government. Previous experiences in Iran had led others to reach the conclusion that intervention was necessary for the advancement of democracy. American general Patrick Hurley, writing to President Roosevelt after the successful 1941 invasion of Iran to secure its oil supplies and prevent Axis takeover, made clear that the United States should prioritize building a government that respected the “rights of man as set forth in the Constitution.” He contended that through a program of “self-help” assisted by American expertise and Iran’s abundant resources, Iranians could achieve independence in the face of European imperialist advances.⁴⁴ Arthur Millspaugh, who was tasked with providing financial expertise to the Iranian government during WWII and in decades prior, was far more skeptical of Iranians’ ability to govern themselves. In his 1946 memoir *Americans in Persia* he argued that the result of Russian and British interference was that “Persia [could not] be left to herself.” Furthermore, he stated that the road to civilization has not been “good for all regions and races” and therefore the United States would have to

41. U.S. Department of State, *F.R.U.S., Iran 1951-1954*, 71.

42. U.S. Department of State, *F.R.U.S., Iran 1951-1954*, 97.

43. U.S. Department of State, *F.R.U.S., Iran 1951-1954*, 102.

44. U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, The Near East and Africa, Volume IV*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1964), Document 440.

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support initiatives to democratize the country.⁴⁵ Americans at the time harbored and built upon such paternalistic sentiments. For example, one February 1952 dispatch from the Iranian embassy cites Millspaugh and is, for the most part, grudgingly respectful of Mossadegh's efforts to gain independence.⁴⁶ There was a current in early official accounts that indicated a desire for American-inspired democracy in Iran, but prejudice against Mossadegh's eccentricities eventually subsumed these democratic aspirations and caused Americans to forget Millspaugh's and Hurley's calls for the support of democracy.

Culture and American Power Abroad

The argument that the United States undertook Operation AJAX primarily to secure its oil access in the Middle East seems to contradict the evidence which demonstrates the importance of American fears concerning communist subversion. Certainly, concerns for oil nationalization factored in, but the overwhelming amount of evidence points to communism as the primary concern of Americans. Deeper consideration of the wider context and American priorities weakens the conclusion that the communist threat was secondary to concerns for oil in Americans' minds. The threat of losing oil revenue or supply was not nearly as terrifying to Americans as the threat of communist takeover. Headlines usually warned in dire tones that the communist threat was real in Iran. *Foreign Relations of the United States (F.R.U.S.)* documents are filled with references to leftist inspired violence. In separate TV interviews Charles L. Harding and Henry Grady downplayed the importance of Iranian oil on domestic supply⁴⁷ and focused on the risk of Soviets snatching the oil,⁴⁸ respectively. Fear of communism, exacerbated by feelings that Mossadegh was not the *man* to meet the challenge, was the primary motivator for U.S. intervention.

Another important revelation is that the roots of Operation AJAX lie in the Truman administration. Previous scholarship points to the change in administrations, with the Eisenhower administration's beginning in early 1953 as a turning point. The Eisenhower administration was undoubtedly more comfortable with covert operations and Eisenhower's CIA organized other

45. Arthur Chester Millspaugh, *Americans in Persia* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1946), 242-251.

46. U.S. Department of State, *F.R.U.S., Iran 1951-1954*, 65.

47. "Longines Chronoscope with Charles L. Harding," Youtube.com, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sb76BOo3j4g>.

48. "Longines Chronoscope with Henry F. Grady," Youtube.com, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sb76BOo3j4g>.

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regime changes across the world. Even so, it would be unwise to pinpoint administration change as the turning point in U.S.-Iranian relations. The critical months of Mossadegh's early premiership were more important in establishing how the U.S. was going to relate to Iran. The visit and failed negotiations in late 1951 and early 1952 mark the critical period in which the seeds of intervention were sown. After failures to negotiate a settlement, Americans became increasingly hostile, and negative interpretations of Mossadegh, which were informed by American prejudice and paranoia, reigned. This cultural lens reveals the shifts in American attitudes and tentative covert plans during the Truman administration which were necessary for the commitment to Operation AJAX once Eisenhower assumed office. The attitudes solidified in the Truman administration were instrumental in the Eisenhower administration's decision to throw its weight behind covert action in concert with the British.

These trends together reveal how information was interpreted, ignored, or reacted to in the cultural context of the era. On a day-to-day basis, decision makers had to process amounts of information too large to make complete sense of. The information they chose to focus on regarding Iran and their reaction to that information reflects the paranoia of McCarthyism and the prejudice of racial and gendered thinking. This conclusion does not necessarily reject scholarship, which does not place its focus on culture. Instead, cultural analysis, in this case, qualifies previous arguments and reminds that decisions are not made in a completely rational manner. This qualification is important if we are to fully grasp the reasons American decision makers decided to take such drastic action. Operation AJAX was a defining moment in America's relations with the Middle East. The same methods would be reused, and the arguments reiterated, in future interventions across the region and globe.

Exploring the relationship between culturally-influenced ideology and government actions reveals a wider trend. Culture and rhetoric help to shape the lens through which policymakers consume information. This filtering, in turn, limits the range of "reasonable" options available to leaders. The anti-communist, gendered, and orientalist rhetoric of the 1950s rationalized the 1953 coup through the same process that Islamophobia and counter-terrorist ideology has come to justify various forms of violent intervention in the recent past across the Middle East. This method of history is not the most clean or easy to follow, but it reveals a far more nuanced view of how American power materializes abroad.

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